





Papers for Thoughtful Readers.

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WHAT IS THE RELIGION THAT  
MAN NEEDS ?

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BY

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## WHAT IS THE RELIGION THAT MAN NEEDS ?

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SOME of the advanced thinkers of the day recommend the study of Comparative Religions. We do not understand how a system of education can be called thorough which tells us nothing about the religions that have held sway among men, seeing that the course of national development has often been greatly determined by this. But if it is important to study the religions that have prevailed among men, especially those that have prevailed among the nations we have most to do with, it is at least of equal importance that we should ascertain what kind of religion man needs, so that we may be in a position to estimate aright the various religions that come before us in our studies. Let us then enquire what are the characteristics that a religion should possess to make it meet the requirements of mankind generally.

The religion that man *needs* is not the religion that man *desires*. Man desires a religion that shall satisfy his conscience at as little cost to himself as possible. There is in men the consciousness that they are more or less dependent on God for their welfare, and a feeling that they must render some kind of homage to the Ruler of the world, in order that things may go well with them, now and hereafter. But there is another great law in man's being urging him to indulge his own appetites and inclinations. Now the study is how

to reconcile inclination and obligation. Too great concessions made to the religious principle will involve the sacrifice of one's inclination. What men generally aim at is then to keep the religious principle from being too authoritative. Religion must be made to moderate her claims so as not to harass the principle of self-gratification. Hence the tendency to lower the character of God, so that the conscience may not subject us unpleasantly to one whom we feel to be indisposed to let us have our own way. What history exhibits to us is not a beautiful rivalry among men to attain to the loftiest conceptions of God, to elevate and purify religion. Very different is the spectacle presented. Men are ever aiming to bring the demands and teachings of religion down to the level of their own desires. As a general rule, we find that those religions have had the greatest vogue which bring the least restraint to bear upon men, at the same time that they allow them to think that they are very religious.

We may illustrate this by a reference to the history of the Israelites. At Mount Sinai they received instruction as to the nature and requirements of the one living and true God, the Supreme Spirit, the invisible One. They were taught that God is a holy Being. God had delivered them from a miserable captivity in Egypt, and there was every reason to believe that they would cleave to him. But when Moses had been some days away from them in the Mount, communing with God, they threw away the painful sense of obligation and yielded to their inclinations, making an image of gold, and worshipping it. Immediately they threw off the restraints which they had been under, and began to dance and sing and indulge in various kinds of sinful pleasure. While they thought of God as a holy

and spiritual Being, they were under restraint, and dared not act out what was in their hearts ; but when they had made an idol, and thought of God as present in that idol, the feeling of His holiness vanished, and they immediately began to indulge their evil lusts.

In most religions we find a kind of compromise between inclination and obligation. The centripetal forces of the former and the centrifugal forces of the latter are brought, as near as may be, into equipoise. Man, as it were, makes a treaty with God, agreeing to do certain things out of supposed deference to the will of God, on condition that in other things he may be allowed to seek his own way. That religion is most to the taste of men which most happily combines obligation with inclination.

Man is a sinner, and has no idea of giving up sinning, and his great aim is to sin as comfortably as possible. Set up before him the conception of a God of infinite power, holiness, wisdom, goodness, and truth, and the instinctive aim of the mind is at once to make war upon this conception, to alter it and degrade it. Given a perfect code of morals, immediately the sinner seeks to neutralize the condemning power of that code, persuading himself that it has been given him as an ideal thing, not as something necessary to be followed ; and his uneasy conscience will do its best to find something a good deal under this high ideal to be the real standard. Some may be ready to exclaim that this representation is anything but complimentary to man. Who that impartially surveys the state of society in historic ages, in various climes, will think that any great compliments are called for ? The Greeks are acknowledged to have made attainments in art, literature, and culture that

have scarcely been rivalled in two thousand years. There was no lack of philosophers to speak to them from time to time of the Author of all, and of the best means of getting into harmony with the government of the world and the constitution of universal things ; yet it is undeniable that the religion that maintained its hold upon them throughout these ages of culture and of matchless supremacy in art was a religion that offered the least obstacle to the indulgence of their natural passions and dispositions. They had, if any people ever had, the wisdom of this world in its perfection ; yet nothing could possibly be more foreign to all their religious notions than the idea of a holy, omniscient, truth-loving God.

Almost everybody knows something about Socrates, that wise man who lived more than 300 years before Christ in Athens. He saw that God must be a very different being from what the mass of the Grecks believed, and he endeavoured to show his countrymen that they were wrong in their religious notions and their practice. What was the result ? Did they receive the teaching with thankfulness ? Did they hasten to discard their erroneous and unworthy views of God ? Not at all. On the contrary, they got very angry with Socrates, and were not satisfied until they had condemned him to die the death of a felon. His teaching made them uncomfortable, because it tended to make them feel that they were sinful and that they were far from fulfilling God's requirements. They actually compelled the best man who had ever lived among them to drink poison, because he taught them the truth concerning God.

In order, then, to ascertain what the religion is that man needs, it is altogether in vain to ask what religion does man desire. His desires conceal from him the religion that he needs.



Man cannot be trusted to determine his own religion. Impartiality is a prime requisite in this enquiry, and that is just what is ordinarily absent from the mind of man. The fact that he is a sinner places him under a bias. We do not submit to the brigands in a country the question what kind of legislation is necessary to put a stop to brigandage. The forger cannot be trusted to make laws for forgers. Men that are fond of drink are not the sort of men to determine how the liquor traffic shall be dealt with. And they who do not love God, but prefer their own will to His, are not the sort to determine the doctrines and precepts of religion. We may suspect that a religion which is from God for mankind will make very prominent those facts which man is tempted to keep in the background. We find that men are naturally bent upon their own aggrandizement and laudation. A religion that is from God will paint man as he is and not as he likes to appear, its object being to save him from self-trust and lead him to feel his need of divine aid.

On the supposition that God may have given a religion to mankind, it is reasonable to conclude that it will have regard to the laws of man's mind, these having been given by infinite wisdom. We may presume that it will not ignore the freedom of the will, the power of choice, the susceptibility to motives which characterize the nature which God has bestowed upon us. It will address man in the language of admonition, warning, encouragement, invitation, and will save man from sin through the exercise of his own powers, by means of suitable motives brought to bear upon him.

A religion that is to be for all mankind must be free from national characteristics in all that pertains to its essence.

Whatever might cause it to be particularly adapted to any one nation, would be a disadvantage as regards other nations. Judaism, being intensely national, is not a religion that is adapted to mankind generally. The religion that is for all mankind must be colourless as regards national distinctions. A similar remark may be made with regard to class distinctions, whether of rank, of wealth, or occupation. We may go further and say that a religion which is for all nations, tribes, and languages of men, must not identify itself with any particular form or stage of civilization. It comes to meet the wants of the savage as well as of the man of culture. The only question it puts to every man is, Art thou a sinner ?

Now nothing is more characteristic of national life than national pride. Each nation has an exaggerated sense of its own importance, and expects all other nations to defer to it. This has been the fruitful cause of wars among men, for national pride involves national jealousy. The ancient Greeks called all other nations barbarians. The Chinese call their country the celestial kingdom, and the name by which they have been accustomed to stigmatize foreigners is 'foreign devils.' On their maps China is represented as occupying almost the whole space, and all the other countries of the world are placed in the corners as of no account. Of course religious teachers would generally find it safest to fall in with these prejudices and represent the nations as paramount. So the Hindoos have been taught to look upon foreigners as *Mlechhas*, with whom it was defiling to have any intercourse. It is evident that men are not predisposed to receive a religion that does not minister to the national pride, or which seems to claim a higher place for some other nation. It is then evident that a religion which

purports to be for all mankind cannot flatter the pride of this or that nation, but must partake of that impartiality with which the Most High must look down upon all His creatures.

Another remark seems to be called for in this connexion. On the supposition that God should give to man a religion, recognizing his free agency, and seeking to deal with him by means of motives, we should not be surprised, if, in handling this religion, many who are brought under its influence should endeavour to bring it into conformity with their own inclinations, by neglecting or setting aside some of its requirements; in a word, should only partially accept it, making the same compromise between its demands and their own inclinations, that we have already referred to in another connexion.

It follows from this that a religion may possibly be just the religion that mankind needs, and it may very inadequately and defectively be represented in the lives of many who profess to follow it.

Now, when we come to consider the question, what kind of religion man stands in need of, it is at once evident that a religion that will save man from his own desires is needed. He must be made to see that his own will is not that which should be gratified; that self-love has been a traitor to him. What he needs is to have taken away that alienation which renders him so reluctant to know God as He really is. He must be brought to see that his own interests are identical with the claims of God. Sometimes, in some of the relations in which he stands to others, love for another, it may be a child, a brother, a wife, takes possession of him, and he then becomes aware that the interests of this loved object are so dear to him that he can very easily sacrifice his own inclina-

tions in order to promote the welfare of that object. He then happily gets a glimpse of the fact there is something more beneficent in its action on the heart than self-love. The joy he has in pleasing this loved one is more than the joy of self-gratification. A child that loves its mother much will gladly do a great many things to please her which it would not have done without that motive. Soldiers have been known cheerfully to expose themselves to peril under the eye of a general whom they desired to please, and whose approbation compensated them for the wounds they received.

> Now, on the supposition that the heart could be filled with  
> the love of the great and glorious God who has called all things into existence, it is evident that there would be an ever-present principle controlling all our powers for their good. It thus appears that what man preeminently needs is to be brought into that harmony with God which will make the will of God sovereign within him. This is really the same as bringing infinite wisdom and goodness and power into relation with our powers for their direction. This is the great secret of man's need. He imagines that he is not happy because he does not have his way altogether, but the fact is directly contrary ; he is unhappy because he has a great deal too much of his own way, which is the way of a blind, blundering creature. It is a grand thing for a noble craft that has been brought into peril by bad steering to have a competent pilot step on board and take command. Wise direction is what the ship needs, and that is what the sinner needs ; wise direction accompanied by hearty submission on his part. Observe we do not say that what man needs is that he should have the better way pointed out to him ; almost all men are acquainted with much more

of duty than they are disposed to comply with ; in almost every land and in almost all religions there are precepts for the guidance of men a good deal better than their actual course of life. What man needs is such a revelation of the better way as shall bring his own wishes into harmony with that way. There must be an abiding assurance on his part that there is the highest advantage in pursuing that better way ; that any other way is certain to be ruinous. What is wanted is such a revelation of the character of God as shall beget the conviction that His will is the indication of our supreme good.

As we have seen, man is biassed by sin. He is conscious that he has not used his powers for the ends for which they were bestowed, and that the Ruler of the universe is justly displeased with him. He naturally believes it to be for his interest to get rid of this unpleasant consciousness as far as possible ; and the way that presents itself most readily is by lowering his conceptions of God's character and will. This is as though the inhabitants of a revolted province should try to persuade themselves that the sovereign is unconcerned at the course they have taken, and will accept of some trifling present they may make him, without requiring them to lay down their arms and place themselves at his discretion. Here, then, is the great difficulty ; men have a consciousness of guilt ; they have a habit of doing their own will in preference to that of their Creator, and this habit is become the law of their being ; self is on the throne, and God is only so far listened to as self permits. How are you going to induce self to abandon its place ? How, too, will you bring about that complete metamorphosis of your will which is necessary before it can be in harmony with the will of God ? Every reflecting man will admit that no one is

so competent to determine the methods by which our happiness and the true end of our existence are to be secured as He who gave us existence. The man who has made a piece of mechanism is the one best fitted to determine the application to be made of that machine. In like manner, it stands to reason that no one can so accurately declare after what manner the powers of man are to be used as He who made man and gave him his powers. When we look at the various orders of the inferior creation we see that they attain to the measure of happiness that belongs to them by their conformity with the laws assigned to them by their Creator. It is evident that the great reason why man does not attain to happiness and a noble life is because he abuses the liberty bestowed upon him and employs his powers in a very different way from that which God intended he should. The witness to this fact is in every man's breast. The conscience of man condemns him for his neglect to obey the Author of his being. To see all this is one thing ; to rectify it is another and a very different thing. Habit has grown with our growth and strengthened with our strength, and instead of being the master of it, as he should be, man is the slave of it. Instances are common everywhere of men who are so deeply persuaded that they are being destroyed by their habits, that they seek to bind themselves by a great curse, and yet are always overcome. The man who is in the habit of taking opium daily is miserable if deprived of the accustomed stimulant ; he knows that the habit impoverishes, weakens, and will ultimately destroy him, and does his best to overcome it ; but his efforts are fruitless ; he is mastered by the appetite. We have known men who have committed suicide because of their inability to overcome some secret sin.



Now there is one habit that is common to all men, and that is the habit of preferring their own will. To overthrow self, some power is needed stronger than self, and there is no power in our being stronger than self.

The religion that man needs is, then, one that will bring to him and introduce into his heart a measure of moral power that he has not. No power such as one man exercises over another (eloquence for instance) will meet the demands of this case. And it is not merely power that is needed, but power in a form that the individual will trust in and open his heart to. And it must be power accompanied by wisdom and goodness in extraordinary measure. Yes, the power that is needed is the power of an infinite love verifying itself to the individual and inducing him to abandon his self-confidence, his pride, his great deference for sinful men. Mere authority, no matter how great, will not meet the demands of the case. Authority may terrify him, and lead him to constrained obedience; but the alienation of the heart will not be affected by the manifestation of authority. It is the heart that must be won. These various considerations have brought us where we can now formulate briefly but distinctly the religion that mankind needs.

1. It is one that addresses mankind generally, without reference to race or class or culture.

2. It brings clearly to view God's type of humanity ; that standard which God proposed that man should conform to. That which man's conscience is unable to recognize, through the bias caused by sinful inclinations, will be shown in its genuine features ; it will thus convince men of sin, guilt, and moral ruin.

3. It will then exhibit the character of God under an aspect fitted to inspire confidence. Here is the great difficulty. For there must be no misrepresentation of the character of God. The justice, truth, or holiness of God may not be sacrificed. We know what account unaided man would give of the matter. He would represent the Supreme Being as having passions akin to man's, only combining with them the power and knowledge that men have not. But the problem to be solved by the religion that man needs is to make the character of God attractive to man without the sacrifice of any of His perfections. Man must be made to see that that God against whom he has been sinning all his days is actuated by friendly feelings towards him, and that it will be vastly better for him to surrender himself to His guidance than not to do it.

4. The religion that mankind needs is one that will be easily comprehended by men of every grade. Therefore it is fitting that it should rest its claim to man's acceptance rather upon facts than upon mere declarations. The alienated and sin-loving heart of man will be little affected by mere declarations of God's interest in him, or by an appeal to those facts of providence with which he is familiar. The love that is to startle him with its greatness must be expressed in facts easily grasped.

5. It should bring to man forgiveness for his sins; for so long as man believes that God is angry with him on account of his sins, it will be impossible for him to exercise that confidence without which there can be no cordial approach on the part of the sinner.

6. This forgiveness must not be represented as the result of a mere fiat of the sovereign God; for it is important that



sin should appear to us a most heinous thing, and if it can be disposed of by a mere sovereign act of the deity, this effect will not be produced. This forgiveness must appear as the purchase of some extraordinary and costly act on the part of God.

7. This forgiveness must be accompanied by a transformation of heart, so that the forgiven man will no longer take pleasure in sin or in self-indulgence, but in doing the will of God. By a change of heart we do not mean a change wrought independently of man's own activity, but that change which necessarily follows from the new convictions that he has regarding the character of God. Love to God and man must take the place of self-love.

8. The pardoned sinner needs to know that there is available for him a power above any that he has hitherto known, a power by which he may resist temptation and deny himself. Otherwise, after having been pardoned, he would be some day found yielding again to temptation, and be brought again under the dominion of sin.

9. Nothing less than a religion embracing these provisions and potentialities will meet the demands of the case. If, in addition, this religion shall show that man is to live after this present life is done, and that both salvation and perdition take hold upon the entire future of his being, it will then bring to bear upon him motives of the most commanding value.

10. The religion that man needs is one that is accompanied by adequate evidence that it is from God. Adequate in this sense, that it will abundantly suffice to carry conviction to the minds that are willing fairly to consider it. As we have said, God, in providing salvation, cannot be expected to over-

ride the laws that he has given to the minds of men. We find that men are in all things placed under responsibility to examine sincerely. Without this nothing that is worthy of their acceptance can establish its claims to their acceptance. We need not be surprised, then, if the evidence accompanying the religion that man needs is of such a character as to demand—not profound mental application, but—a simple willingness to know and do the will of God. As the salvation needed is for men in all grades of development, the evidence accompanying it must be such as can be recognized by the savage as well as by the educated man. Perhaps the most impressive kind of evidence will be furnished in the changed characters of those who have embraced it.

What remains now is to examine the religions that are current among men, and see if there is one that at all fulfils these conditions. For our own part, it is not necessary to say that we believe that there is such a religion. But we have done what we proposed to do, mentioned the characteristics of a religion that will meet the need of man, and we entreat our readers to make the application.

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